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Leaders Eat Last

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EDITORIAL

LEADERS EAT LAST

My guess is that every one of us has experienced the invitation to go to the front of the line for dinner at various events. We wince a little and remember something about the “one who wants to be first will be last.” But our position as pastor or teacher or visitor causes the locals to insist that we eat first. I don’t like when that happens, so when I noticed the title to Simon Sinek’s (2014) book, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t*, I immediately downloaded it to my Kindle and started to read.

Sinek’s book was inspired by the culture of U.S. Marines, a specially trained group in the United States armed forces who are expected to carry out dangerous and difficult operations. To be successful, the Marines must function in high performing teams in which they put their self-interests aside and work together towards a common goal. And when it’s time for food, the leaders always eat last.

What kept me reading this book to the very last page was Sinek’s ability to contextualize his simple yet profound ideas in the sweeping context of history, generations, and human physiology. He does not develop a new theory. He describes how organizations and individuals often go astray when leaders—and that’s all of us, whether we have a “top” position or not—put self-interest ahead of serving others. He likens our current situation to the doctors who were spreading puerperal fever (known as the “black death of childbed”) by their non-sterile techniques. Just as the doctors were a significant factor in the puerperal epidemic, so we ourselves have played and continue to play an undeniable role in the current state of our organizations.

This book is a clarion call to each of us to take responsibility for where our organizations are today. Sinek, who is an ethnographer and leadership expert, names us as a society of addicts. We’re addicted to distraction, technology, alcohol, and food. We’re addicted to dopamine

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and the high we get when people “like” us or text us. We also get high from taking risks—risks that impact the wellness of our whole organization. These addictions, Sinek says, are fueled by our lack of human connections. He shows how abstractions, especially “numbers,” have taken our focus off “humans.”

Sinek points out some of the lessons we can learn from living in an age of “destructive abundance.” He describes five leadership lessons in five chapters: (a) so goes the culture, so goes the company; (b) so goes the leader, so goes the culture; (c) integrity matters; (d) friends matter; and (e) lead the people, not the numbers.

In wondering how we got where we are today, Sinek points to Boomers (those born 1946-1964) and actions taken by economists and the U.S. Congress to repeal laws meant to protect the general public. The emphasis today is often on making more money for shareholders and corporate CEOs rather than taking care of the workers—the people who make the company what it is.

So what is the solution to our current situation? Sinek suggests several things. First, he shows that a “Circle of Safety” is critical for all employees. This provides for a basic human need. The book starts with stories that show how Marines develop a strong sense of trust and willingness to “cover each other’s back.” They have a feeling of belonging, shared values and empathy for one another that enhance trust, cooperation, and problem solving. It is this kind of environment that Sinek believes all humans need in order to live productive lives. He describes and illustrates how people inside the Circle of Safety are protected from outside dangers. This notion of a Circle of Safety is foundational to the book and to the idea that humans have a basic need to feel safe. While everyone who belongs to the group is responsible for keeping the Circle of Safety strong, those with position and authority may be able to influence on a broader scale.

Another point is the importance of serving people inside and outside of the organization before taking care of self-interests. Doing this, Sinek suggests, will actually increase levels of serotonin and oxytocin and make us stronger teams that are able to “fight” addiction. Lest we think this is a Pollyanna-ish idea, Sinek describes companies and leaders who have chosen and not chosen this route and the results of their choices.

Sinek notes that in psychological experiments in which individuals are encouraged toward negative human behaviors, it is those who “answer to” a higher authority who are less likely to hurt others. This idea harmonizes well with a Christian perspective, and places a huge

responsibility on Christians to behave differently than our “culture” or “company” may expect from us. Sinek suggests we need “shared struggle” to draw our teams together. He also believes that having a vision for something greater than our resources can support will drive our teams into innovation—innovation that comes from collaboration and sharing. Again, I see how this concept occurs in Christian organizations. We are often driven to purposes greater than ourselves. And it requires the whole team to reach toward the common mission and protect the Circle of Safety required for the team to keep its focus.

The ideas in this book harmonize well with the articles in this issue of JACL. Beginning with Ellison’s description of Samuel, we see a prophet who accepted his reduced role so the people could receive what they were asking for, even though he knew it wasn’t what God wanted for them. Then our interview with Scott Rodin highlights “who God is” and the reality that Christian leaders are stewards first who are daily transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The three feature articles are examples of what happens when leaders “eat last.” Frawley’s article shows the importance of hiring university presidents who strongly support the mission of the institution. Stahl, Covrig and Newman’s article describes board chair behaviors in the hospital environment. After that, Onongha discusses some of the causes and remedies of corruption. Sinek, by the way, says that integrity is incorruptibility.

In the Leadership Lived section, Douglas points to ways lead pastors can mentor their associates. Thordarson rounds out the collection by challenging us to dialogue about the way we elect officers in the church. Finally, our book reviews and dissertation abstracts are a great resource—especially if you’d like to stay current with research and publications on leadership.

If you want to learn more about Sinek’s book, there are literally hundreds of book reviews online, as well as several videos of the author presenting his ideas. So check it out, along with the articles in this issue of JACL. I think you’ll be glad you did!

Reference

Sinek, S. (2014). *Leaders eat last: Why some teams pull together and others don’t* [Kindle version]. New York, NY: Portfolio/Penguin.